

# Replacing Anxiety

The Master Class in Discipleship Series, August 6 & 7, 2022 | Matthew 6:25-34

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## How can we break anxiety's holds over us?

### **I feel my own anxiety level rising when I watch national news broadcasts.**

I have been a news junkie most of my life. For long seasons of my life, I watched the nightly news like it was an addiction.

Eventually, life got in the way of my habit, and I turned more to radio and print media.

I finally broke the broadcast news habit in one of the recent election cycles. Every time I tuned in, I found myself getting anxious. When I started asking why, I realized that nearly every headline was written as if a crisis of historical proportions were unfolding, and nearly every commentator I heard seemed to absolutely loathe anyone who disagreed with them.

When I noticed just how profoundly anxious the news was making me, I started getting my national and world news exclusively in print. And my anxiety level went way down quickly.

I'm anxious enough already. I don't need anyone pushing anxiety into my life like that.

### **Things that trigger anxiety are all around us.**

A global pandemic with an extended lockdown can trigger anxiety.

Our world is torn by racial tensions, wars, violence, division over political issues, and high inflation. All of that can trigger our anxiety.

If world events don't trigger our anxiety, our personal lives probably will. We face health problems, unexpected bills, family problems, and challenges at work.

Plus, many of us drink too much caffeine. Did you know that too much caffeine can cause anxiety?

With all these triggers around us, is it any wonder that many of us are affected by anxiety?

### **Jesus covered anxiety in the Sermon on the Mount.**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus answers the question, "How do disciples of Jesus live?"

Since Jesus is the Master, the Sermon on the Mount is the Master Class on discipleship.

If Jesus covers anxiety in his Master Class, then we, his disciples, will face anxiety and need to deal with it.

### **In Matthew 6, Jesus answers the question, "How can we break anxiety's hold over us?"**

He insightfully describes our anxious values and thoughts, then systematically unravels them.

Jesus calls us back to an accurate picture of God that becomes an antidote to our anxiety.

Then he calls us to focus on the here and now in ways that finally break anxiety's hold over us.

And that's our goal. We want something that will break anxiety's hold over us.

Jesus gives it to us in the Sermon on the Mount, his Master Class in discipleship. So, let's dig in.

Jesus confronts the problem of anxiety head on.

**Jesus confronts the problem of anxiety head on in Matthew 6:25-32:**

*“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.”*

**When Jesus mentions anxiety here, what does he mean?**

If you are reading from another translation of the Bible, you may read the word “worry.”

The original word here implies self-concern directed toward the future.

Translators use “worry” and “anxiety” interchangeably for self-concern directed toward the future.

**However, let’s draw some helpful distinctions between worry, stress, and anxiety.**

A New York Times article helped me understand the differences between these three.

**Worry** is what happens when our minds focus on what might go wrong in the future.

**Stress** is what happens to our bodies when we perceive a threat. Chemicals cascade through our bodies, preparing us for action.

**Anxiety** brings worry and stress together. There’s a lot of worry and a lot of stress. It involves both mind and body.<sup>1</sup>

**Anxiety is dangerous, toxic stuff that can produce profound symptoms.**

Anxiety quickly gets out of control; anxiety doesn’t need something real to get triggered, and once it is triggered, it quickly moves from an occasional thing to a constant thing.

Our heart rate and breathing can change.

We may sweat, tremble, and feel weak or tired.

Anxiety can cause us to lose sleep and have problems eating and digesting food.

Anxiety can become a persistent, debilitating condition.<sup>2</sup> No wonder Jesus addresses it so bluntly!

**Anxiety is widespread in our culture.**

The New York Time article I mentioned earlier said, “Nearly **40 million people** in the U.S. suffer from an **anxiety disorder**, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/26/smarter-living/the-difference-between-worry-stress-and-anxiety.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/anxiety/symptoms-causes/syc-20350961>

That article was originally published in February of 2020, right before the pandemic.

In 2021, the Pew Research Center asked how we were doing one year into the pandemic. One third claimed that they had experienced anxiety three or more days in the past week. Nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that they had experienced anxiety at least one day in the past week.<sup>3</sup>

It's time for us to talk about anxiety and mental health.

It's time for us to be honest with one another.

I'm grateful for the fact that Jesus confronts it head on.

## Jesus unravels anxiety thread by thread.

**When Jesus starts his teaching on anxiety with the word "therefore," he reminds us that he is confronting anxiety based on what he has already said in the Sermon on the Mount.**

Matthew chapter five is mostly about righteousness. In Matthew 5, Jesus said that if we wanted the blessed life and the Kingdom of God, then we would need surpassing righteousness, a heart righteousness that would change us from the inside out.

Then in chapter 6, Jesus said that we needed that surpassing righteousness in our religious observances, in things like our giving, praying, and fasting. We do these things for God.

Last week we discovered that when we do these things for God, particularly when we fast, we break the hold that money and things have over us. Instead, we definitely choose that we belong to God and that he is in charge.

That's what Jesus says with the word "therefore." We belong to God. God is in charge. THEREFORE, we are ready to unravel anxiety thread by thread.

**In Matthew 6:25, Jesus states plainly that with that we are not to be anxious.**

We are not to be anxious about the things we need in life or about the status of our bodies. He pretty much includes every anxiety we could ever face in those two categories.

Why should we not be anxious? Because God values our lives. If God values our lives, then God will sort out what we need. Is that not profound?

**Next, Jesus uses the word picture of birds to encourage us to reflect on our worries about life.**

Jesus acknowledges that some of us worry about what we will eat or drink.

Food and water are two of our most basic needs in life. They stand in for all our physical needs. If we're going to worry about anything, we will worry about the most basic things.

If we are tempted to worry about basic things, Jesus tells us to consider the birds of the air.

They don't have to sow or reap or store food. And yet, God provides everything they need.

If God does that for common birds that nobody values particularly, then won't he do the same for us? The assumed answer is, "Of course he will!"

**Then, Jesus invites us to consider our worries about clothing in light of wildflowers.**

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/16/many-americans-cont...perience-mental-health-difficulties-as-pandemic-enters-second-year/>

When Jesus mentions clothing, he is also implying everything that gives us self-esteem and worth in the eyes of others.

If we are tempted to worry about how other people view us, Jesus says to look at the wildflowers. Our Bibles talk about the lilies of the field. We are not sure which wildflower Jesus meant, but it's clear that the flower was beautiful.

Jesus points out that God adorns a flower that grows naturally with beauty that rivals the great king of Israel, Solomon, who was known for his wisdom and wealth.

If God does that for the wildflowers that are gone in a day or two, won't he do the same for us? The implied answer is, "Yes, of course!"

### **Once again (in verse 31), Jesus summarizes his argument with the word "therefore."**

Therefore, we have no need to be anxious.

Jesus unravels the fabric of anxiety thread by thread.

### **Jesus prescribes trust in God's goodness as the antidote to anxiety.**

#### **Jesus makes this a matter of trust when he calls those of us who experience anxiety "you of little faith."**

Jesus calls those who can't see that God cares more for them than he does for birds and wildflowers "you of little faith."

This is important to Jesus because he invents the term "you of little faith."

It's a compound word in Greek, and it occurs in the New Testament records of Jesus' words and in no place else. Jesus invented a word to describe how he thought.

"You of little faith." It's a Jesus-only word that points out that anxiety is a matter of faith.

When we're anxious, we are frequently looking at God in the wrong way.

### **Jesus warns us that anxiety is based on a wrong way of thinking, a "Gentile" way of thinking.**

Jesus describes the Gentile way of thinking as materialistic. In this case, Jesus is saying that the worldly, normal way of thinking is to view the stuff of life, and body, and reputation, and appearances as the most real and most important things in life.

Earlier, Jesus addressed the way that Gentiles or worldly people view their gods. Back at the beginning of Matthew chapter six, Jesus warned against babbling while praying like the Gentiles or worldly people do. Why do they babble and pray with many words? Because they believe their gods don't know them, don't care for them, don't want to help them.

The Gentile or worldly way of thinking has the wrong values; it's materialistic.

The Gentile or worldly way of thinking has a wrong picture of God; it's deistic or agnostic.

The Gentile or worldly way of thinking quickly leads to anxiety.

That's not the biblical way of thinking, nor is that Jesus' way of thinking.

### **Satan tried to get Jesus to accept this kind of thinking when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness.**

After Jesus was baptized, he went into the wilderness to fast and pray for forty days.

At the end of that time, Jesus was hungry and physically weak; that's when Satan tempted him.

Outwardly, Satan's first temptation sounded pretty benign. He asked Jesus to use his power to turn stones into loaves of bread.

However, underneath, Satan was tempting Jesus to this kind of Gentile or worldly thinking.

To turn the stones into bread would mean that Jesus' first thought should be food; that would be worldly, materialistic thinking.

To turn the stones into bread would also mean that Jesus doesn't trust God the Father to provide for him. He would doubt God's goodness, power, and knowledge; that would be deistic or agnostic thinking like that of the world.

Satan's tempted Jesus with anxiety. Jesus flatly refused Satan's temptation.

### **Jesus prescribes a right understanding of God's nature as the beginning of an antidote to anxiety.**

God is good. He created us, he loves us, and—even when we sin—he still loves us.

God is powerful. God is not stumped by any crisis or overwhelmed by any need we have. God is the one who created the universe out of nothing. He is all-powerful and completely capable of handling anything we bring to him.

God knows. Jesus says explicitly here that God knows all about our needs. In fact, God knows all things, so the future doesn't surprise him nor do our needs.

Our all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God is inclined to give us everything we need.

When we know from the start that this is who God is, then it makes our own anxiety seem small by comparison. What is there to worry about?

### **My own experience shows me how that right understanding of God's nature leads to trust.**

I'm a planner; I think about the future. A lot.

That's a nice way of saying that I also worry. A lot.

When I am planning or worrying about the future, I come before God and bring it all to him.

When I have big things that I'm planning for or worrying about, my prayers get more urgent, and sometimes I fast in seeking God's guidance.

It's amazing how when I come before God in prayer and fasting with both big plans and big worries, the same thing seems to happen each time.

When I'm fasting and praying, I tend to start out something like, "God, here's the situation. Here's my question, here's my plan, or here's my worry. What do you want me to do?"

But it's amazing that every time I do, my prayers just seem to change quickly.

They change from "Here's what I want" to confession. I find myself confessing my sin to God, and there are times when I feel like I am never going to find the bottom of my sin.

But as I do, my prayers always change from confession to praise. I find myself praising God for who he is and thanking him for all he has done for me. I am overwhelmed. Every single time.

And those prayers of praise and thanksgiving remind me of how trustworthy God is, how powerful he is, how good he is, how he is King, and how I serve him.

I leave those times of prayer and fasting without specific answers, but I also leave those times of prayer with great trust that God is in charge and that all will be well.

Jesus pushes us to that kind of picture of God as an antidote to anxiety.

That antidote helps, but anxiety is not yet broken. Jesus has one more principle to throw in.

## Living with God in the present breaks anxiety's hold over us.

### **In Matthew 6:33-34, Jesus invites us to live with God in the present:**

*"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."*

### **Tomorrow is God's problem. Do not be anxious about tomorrow.**

Today is going to be okay.

It may have trouble, but God is good and powerful; he knows what we need and is inclined to provide everything we need.

So, there is nothing we need to do other than live here in today, in this day, with God.

### **Instead of worrying and being anxious, Jesus commands us to pursue the Kingdom of God.**

When we read "the Kingdom of God" here, we can think "God's purposes in the world."

As disciples of Jesus our job is to seek or pursue God's purposes in this world.

That is what we spend our time doing, and that is where our thoughts should be focused.

If we think back to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, that's what we said we wanted more than anything else. Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount by addressing the blessed life. The blessed life is nothing other than life inside the Kingdom of God.

Who is blessed? That was the key question back in the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5. Who gets life inside the Kingdom of God? That's what we want. So, let's focus our thoughts on pursuing the Kingdom of God, let's spend our energy on pursuing the Kingdom of God, and let's limit the attention we give to worries and anxiety.

### **As we pursue God's Kingdom, we also pursue God's righteousness.**

If God's Kingdom is God's purpose for the world, then God's righteousness is his purpose for me.

In the words of the Lord's Prayer, God's righteousness is like God's Kingdom coming and God's will being done in me as it is in heaven.

Back in **Matthew 5:20** Jesus said we would need God's righteousness,

*"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*

That means that God's righteousness poured into me and shaped in me as a disciple of Jesus is MY pathway through life and ultimately to God's Kingdom.

### **If God's Kingdom and righteousness are my first goal every day, then very little else will matter.**

Jesus says that all the other stuff will tend to sort itself out.

There will be no reason for anxiety. There will be no need to worry.

That's how we break anxiety's hold over us.